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Satha's best race ever

Sarban Singh

MALAYSIA Boleh had not been minted when Sathasivam Sitheravellu or Satha decided to steal a march on the rest of us.

He started winning long-distance races at national level when he was still a schoolboy, a nice precursor to his protracted struggle of climbing out of the economic morass.

But it was not plain sailing for the son of a Public Works Department lorry driver, who has nine siblings, to excel in sports as well as in education.

His family was so poor that his breakfast was paid for by the school. "My dad could not afford to buy me proper running shoes so I had to run my races barefooted," he recalls.

Satha, now 48, was the first schoolboy in the country to run the 5,000m race under 16 minutes.

For this and other feats, he was honoured as the country's Best Schoolboy Athlete in 1974, receiving the award from then Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Satha's 5,000m record was only broken almost 16 years later.

Despite a punishing athletics schedule, Satha, who studied at St Paul's Institution in Seremban, scored a Grade 2 for the MCE in 1975.

As his family could not afford to further his education, Satha decided to get a job.

"Some people in the Malaysian Amateur Athletics Union had promised to get me jobs. However, nothing came about," he says.

He then took a job inserting newspaper supplements, earning five sen per copy. He also did odd jobs at the wet market and construction sites, even chopping wood to earn money.

"I used to clean cemeteries during Cheng Beng to get some extra cash," he says.

As athletics was not taking him anywhere where his career was concerned, he made the painful decision to quit the national team.

"I was not going anywhere. Being the eldest son in the family, I had plenty of responsibilities," he says.

He then decided to pursue Form 6 studies via night classes. Despite that, he took part in inter-bank meets in 1978 and 1979 and won his favourite event (5,000m), defeating national athletes.

Then came his big break in February 1978.

He was offered a job as a clerical assistant in Bank Simpanan Nasional. He joined Maybank 10 months later.

Satha, who was doing well in the inter-bank meets, one of the more important athletics meets then, was also noticed by two Russian coaches who were training the national athletes.

"They recommended that I be sent to Moscow as one the 10 athletes for training before the 1980 Olympics.

"I was looking forward to representing the country again but sadly, this did not happen as Malaysia boycotted the Games," he says.

For four years from 1980, he coached Maybank athletes with Ishtiaq Mubarak, a former national hurdles champion.

Satha then left for the United States to pursue a degree in management/marketing and minor in sports at Marshall State University in West Virginia.

Satha, who married former Negri Sembilan State hockey player Veronica

Krishnan in 1982, had to go alone.

"I had to pay for my tuition and accommodation, so I had no choice but to do odd jobs there too. I cut grass at the local church and worked at a pizza parlour and in the library to earn extra money," he says.

He excelled academically and was given a study grant in his second year. He made it to the Dean's list for two consecutive years.

Satha, who was also appointed president of the international students at the university, still found it difficult to make ends meet despite the grant.

"There were times when I survived on tea and boiled eggs," he says.

Upon his return with a degree in hand, he set his sights on the rat race. He rose to the position of senior manager of human resource training and development, organisation development and operations, holding senior positions in Maybank, Southern Finance and Affin Bank.

Last year, Satha obtained his master's degree from New Zealand's Asia Pacific International University.

For him, nothing is impossible.

"Our attitudes determine what we will be. It is we who impose limits on ourselves for nothing is out of reach," he says.

Today he is regional human resource manager for Cabot Speciality Chemicals Inc, Asia Pacific.

Satha, who also lectures part-time, has enrolled for his doctorate in human resource management at Trinity College in the US via a distance-learning programme.

He stresses that he would not have progressed in life if not for some individuals.

He singles out former teacher, coach and friend Edwin Abraham, businessman Lee Soo Kok, family friend Vengadasalam and former NST journalist, the late M.T. Lingam, former State Amateur Athletics Association president Tan Chin Beng, who provided him with a RM50 allowance and a place to stay at the Negri Sembilan Chinese Recreation Club to enable him to study and train in Seremban, and his superiors at Maybank - Rafiah Salim, Rosman Mohamad and Yeoh Onn Sain.

Satha's story is not only that of an accomplished national athlete whose academic success equalled his athletic accomplishments, but that of an individual whose never-say-die attitude will remain a shining example for many to follow.

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